

INVESTIGATING THE EFFECT OF SYSTEMIC CONSTRUCTIVIST COUPLE THERAPY  
(SCCT) - BASED RELATIONSHIP ENHANCEMENT WORKSHOPS ON THE  
RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION OF COUPLES IN THE COMMUNITY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAMME IN PSYCHOLOGY

YORK UNIVERSITY

TORONTO, ONTARIO

OCTOBER 2013

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## Abstract

Relationships play an essential role in the well-being of individuals and there have been many attempts in recent years to help couples build stronger bonds with each other. For the purposes of this study, a workshop format of a previously validated couples intervention was created and its effectiveness was investigated. Specifically, this study examined the effect of a four-session workshop rooted in the empirical findings of systemic constructivist couple therapy (SCCT) research. A sample of 15 couples participated in this workshop over a span of 8 months. The results of this study showed that the workshop was effective in enhancing the relationship of the couples as measured through five self-report measures completed pre and post participation in the workshop. The self-report measures captured relationship quality, styles of listening, emotional experience of the relationship and closeness with the partner. These results and the implication of this study are discussed.

### Acknowledgements

This work is dedicated to my supervisor Dr. David Reid without whom I would not be where I am. Thank you for the countless meetings and the amount of time you invested in my growth and education. I am grateful for all the Sundays you dedicated to the workshop for eight months and for your mentorship at every single session. Your strong faith in me and the knowledge that I can always count on your support helped me tremendously throughout this journey. When I look back, I realize what I have learned from you exceeds well beyond the realm of academia. I have had the privilege to witness kindness, patience, ethics, respect and passion for one's work through you.

I also want to thank my committee members Dr. Bohr, Dr. Rich and Dr. Pelham for dedicating their time going over my research and providing me with their valuable feedback.

I am grateful for the statistical consultation with Mirka Ondrack, the award from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, my friend Mellissa Button who helped me with the recruitment process and the many couples who participated in this research.

I am also thankful for the unwavering support of my parents Saeideh Dastmalchi and Farhad Eshghi, my brother Payam Eshghi and my friend Negin Mirtorabi in all my endeavors.

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## Investigating the Effects of Systemic Constructivist Couple Therapy (SCCT)-Based Relationship Enhancement Workshops on the Relationship Satisfaction of Couples in the Community

The high rates of divorce and relationship dissolution is troubling, especially when marriage is associated with a number of physical and psychological benefits for individuals. The aim of this study was to provide couples in the community with assistance in improving their relationship quality through a structured four-session workshop and further evaluate the results. Specifically, this study investigates the effectiveness of a four-session relationship enhancement workshop rooted in the previously supported principles of systemic constructivist couple therapy (SCCT).

Humans are social beings and have an innate desire for connection with others. Many of the core psychological human needs are met and fulfilled in well functioning intimate relationships. Specifically, in close relationships people get an opportunity to be intimately seen, accepted, supported and loved for who they are while simultaneously being able to provide love and care in return. Moreover, close relationships provide a context in which partners can share the many ups and downs of existence with each other and be a witness to each other's journey through life. Having such a connection with another being not only enhances the quality of human life but can also help people handle the many challenges of life in a more graceful manner.

In addition, often times close relationships can become a vehicle for self-growth and understanding. When involved in a relationship, partners become much more aware of their implicit values, ideals and expectations. This is because being in a relationship with another being, who likely has his/her own unique perspectives on life, allows one to compare and



contrast one's own idiosyncratic ways of operating in the world with another's. Through this process individuals become clearer in their own implicit assumptions and may come to realize better what they value most in life.

Marriage is a life transition that many individuals will experience at some point in their lives. Marriage is known to have many benefits for the partners in union. For instance, Schoenborn (2004) researched the relationship between health and marital status of 127,545 US adults who were 18 years of age or older. Her analysis was based on data obtained from the National Health Interview Surveys (NHIS) in the years 1999 - 2002. Respondents could choose between five options of marital status including: married, divorced or separated, living with a partner, widowed, and never married (Schoenborn, 2004). The results showed that, for the most part, married people reported better physical and psychological health than their counterparts did (Schoenborn, 2004). Despite all the benefits of marriage, however, the divorce rate is very high in many countries. For example, the divorce among most industrialized western countries is about 40% (Hahlweg, Baucom, Grawe-Gerber & Snyder, 2010). Another benefit provided by marriage is the positive effect it can have on the offspring. The relationship between the partners greatly impacts their children. When children are in their early formative years they observe their parents' relationship with each other to learn about ways to relate to another being and function interpersonally in the world. They thus develop perceptions and expectations, which lead to relationship schemas that will affect all their future relationships. Thus, the psychological development of children is greatly affected by the quality of the first relationship to which they are exposed – i.e. their parents'. In addition to impacting the child's perception of what relationships should be like, the couple's relationship with each other has an immediate effect on the child and his/her development. For instance, Amato and Keith (1991) conducted a meta-

analysis that compared the well-being of children from divorced homes and those living with both parents. The meta-analysis consisted of 92 studies which included more than 13,000 children. In their study, a broad spectrum of measures of children's well being was considered including: academic performance, conduct, psychological and social adjustment, self-concept and relationship with parents (Amato & Keith, 1991). Overall, children living with both parents did significantly better on all measures of well-being compared with children from single parent households. It should be noted, however, that the effect sizes were relatively small (Amato & Keith, 1991).

The high rate of divorce is problematic, and does not make sense from either a biological or social psychological perspective. There is a natural and historical tendency among the majority of humans to live intimately with strong social bonds (Frith & Frith, 2010). Furthermore, the impact of divorce on children is known to be normally negative or far from what is deemed desirable. The high divorce rates are surprising since most individuals who marry are satisfied with their relationship in the beginning (Bradbury & Karney, 2004). What seems to be deficient, however, is the ability to maintain and foster these interpersonal bonds. The stresses and challenges of life are inevitable, and demand teamwork and constructive communication between partners who aim to remain strong as a couple when faced with these hardships. Unfortunately, however, most couples are not taught nor educated about effective interpersonal functioning and despite their initial attraction and love for each other grow apart under the pressures of life.

Given the above findings, there have been some attempts in recent years to create and implement programs for couples interested in enhancing the quality of their relationship. For instance, the US government spent more than a million dollars per year on programs aiming to

increase the relationship satisfaction of couples from 2005-2011 (Johnson, 2012). The intention was to help couples, especially the poor and colored couples, have better relationships. This is because both factors: being poor and a person of color are correlated with being divorced or unmarried (Johnson, 2012). Although funding programs for couples by the US government has been a great step towards addressing the difficulties that couples face, one key weakness in this initiative was that many programs were not empirically supported (Johnson, 2012).

Halford (2011) speaks about different existing programs that are categorized as Couple Relationship Education (CRE). Some of these programs have been investigated empirically for their efficacy. Halford (2011) notes examples of such programs include: Prevention Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) (Markham, Floyd, Stanley, Storaasli, 1988), the Couple Commitment And Relationship Enhancement (Couple CARE) (Halford, Moore, Wilson, Dyer, & Farrugia, 2006), and Relationship Enhancement (RE) (Guerney, 1977, 1987). CRE programs differ from couple therapy because their goal is to work with couples and teach them skills when they are in satisfying relationships (Halford, 2011). In other words, CRE programs serve as preventative measures that aim to work with couples when their bond is strong and protect against future deterioration (Halford, 2011). Halford (2011) argues that most often in couple therapy the patterns of communication and interaction between the partners are long ingrained and established which makes change challenging. Moreover, CRE programs are largely designed to improve a couple's chance for a mutually satisfying relationship by working on known factors that affect relationship quality such as communication and conflict management (Halford, 2011).

Another program providing couple relationship education is the nonprofit PAIRS foundation that is currently marketed to the public. PAIRS stands for Practical Application of

Intimate Relationship Skills and was initially created by a social worker and therapist, Lori Gordon in 1983. The PAIRS approach evolved into a 4-5 month, 120-hour program on relationship education (Durana, 1996) composed of a variety of ideas pertaining to marital function. According to DeMaria (2009), the PAIRS program follows a multidimensional model that integrates concepts, skills and values about love, intimacy and marriage. According to the PAIRS program claims it uses evidence-based approaches, but accessing the research evidence is problematic. The best source comes from the PAIRS web page [www.evaluation.pairs.com/SFR/](http://www.evaluation.pairs.com/SFR/) where DeMaria (2009) provides a brief overview of several studies, many unpublished, with Durana the sole author of all five of the only journal publications with the most recent being Durana (1998). The other references are mainly unpublished or presentations providing program evaluation outcome results indicating that pre-post scores improved after participating in the PAIRS 120-hour programs. DeMaria (2009), formerly the Chair of the PAIRS Research Task Force, indicated that there has been since 2006 a long-term investigation into the impact of PAIRS programs on participants and they have been using a range of assessment measures. In 2009, the research was ongoing and no published final report was cited except to say that the early analysis of outcomes were encouraging at that time. Indicative of way the PAIRS foundation appears to emphasize a business-like promotion of their model is the following taken from their description of PAIRS on their web page:

PAIRS ranks among the pre-eminent, evidence-based relationship and marriage education program in the world, having evolved into a comprehensive model that attends to ethics, program evaluation, rigorous quality management, and ongoing training for leaders. Educators, counselors, health care professionals, clergy and lay leaders nationwide are regularly invited to partner with PAIRS Foundation to deliver programs

that strengthen marriages, families and improve outcomes for children in their communities. (“History”, 2013, para. 13)

### **Systemic Constructivist Couple Therapy and the Role of *We-ness***

Systemic constructivist couple therapy (SCCT) was developed by David W. Reid as a result of observing and working with many couples over several years (Reid et al., 2006; Reid, Doell, Dalton, & Ahmad, 2008). Specifically, couples that sought intervention with Dr. Reid were informed that in addition to receiving therapy their relationship would be studied in order to understand the dynamics of marriage better. Thus, the couples were drawn into understanding their own relationship. Gradually the recording and analyzing of these therapy sessions led to the detection and understanding of a psychological construct named *we-ness* or couple identity. *We-ness* is an identification each partner has with the relationship they share with their partner (Reid et al., 2006; Reid et al., 2008). This identification with the relationship, not the other partner, is a clear distinction that needs to be emphasized (Ahmad, 2012; Reid et al., 2006) as *we-ness* is not a loss of self or an overly dependent existence with another. In fact, when *we-ness* is strong partners are able to be more themselves in the relationship with their partner than in any other contexts in their lives. Feeney (2007) uses the term paradox to describe the research findings that intimate bonds, in fact, foster and strengthen independency and individuality of partners; a result also reported by Reid et al. (2006). In satisfying relationships *we-ness* or couple identity becomes intertwined with the self-identity of the partners in such a way that the partners feel the relationship is part of who they are (Fergus & Reid, 2001). *We-ness* is an orientation or mental framework from which partners in an intimate bond construe the experiences that occur in their relationship (Doell, 2010). More specifically just like the psychological notion that asserts the observer ‘I’ processes the object ‘me’, similarly in satisfied couples the ‘we’ processes the ‘us’

(Ahmad, 2012). It should also be noted that *we-ness* is generally detected through the language and words partners use when speaking about their relationship (Reid et al., 2006; Reid et al., 2008). Reid et al. (2006) have generated a coding system for measuring the level of a couple's *we-ness* from the spontaneous discourse of the couple. High scores on *we-ness* in this coding system reflect an increasing tendency to see one's partner and the self as part of a single unit while simultaneously demonstrating a decreasing tendency to see one's partner and the self as separate and contrary rather than synthesizing with each other.

There is strong empirical support for the construct of *we-ness* and its correlation with relationship satisfaction. Reid et al. (2006) conducted two longitudinal studies to test the effectiveness of SCCT and its theoretical foundation based on *we-ness*. Specifically, 13 distressed couples participated in each study and received six 2-hour therapy sessions. The SCCT protocol is focused on the dynamics of the marriage and thus uses emotional, cognitive and behavioral interventions to shift the qualities of the relationship so that the sense of *we-ness* or identification of each partner with the relationship emerges. Therefore, they were not taught *we-ness* as a construct, but guided through the therapeutic processing so that their personal sense of identifying with the relationship became more and more manifested and that manifestation was reliably detected by the measure of their sense of the relationship being part of who they are in real time. That sense of *we-ness* proved predictive of their future satisfaction and attitude towards each other. The results of both studies demonstrated that there was a significant increase on the couples' reports of relationship quality from pre to post therapy on self-report measures of satisfaction, similarity, closeness, and mutuality. Furthermore, the couples' first and last therapy sessions were recorded and coded for levels of *we-ness* implicit in their interpersonal discourse. Results showed that there was a significant increase in the couples' levels of *we-ness*

from pre to post therapy, and *we-ness* was significantly correlated with the self-report measures of relationship quality in the final session. Additionally, increases in self-report measures of relationship quality were significantly correlated with increases in the *we-ness* levels of the couples. Moreover, a follow-up study was conducted for the second study. Results indicated that the gains made in therapy were retained at a 2-year follow-up. Furthermore, the self-report measures of relationship quality during follow-up were significantly correlated with the level of *we-ness* measured 2 years prior at the end of therapy.

At the core of *we-ness* lies interpersonal processing, and its cultivation and strengthening is the objective of SCCT (Doell, 2010; Reid et al., 2006; Reid et al., 2008). Interpersonal processing has three underlying components (Reid et al., 2008). First, there is an awareness and understanding of the self in the relationship with the partner. Second, there is an in-depth exploration and attempt to grasp the partner's experiences. Finally, there is a recognition and comprehension of the reciprocal nature of how the partners impact each other in the relationship. The techniques used in SCCT are formulated in a way to facilitate each partner's interpersonal processing in service of their relationship (Doell, 2010). The three major techniques used in SCCT are the internalized partner, thinking and speaking in the third person and listening to understand one's partner (these techniques are explained in more detail in the Methods section). These techniques all tap into and strengthen different aspects of interpersonal processing or *we-ness* by making the partners more aware of themselves, the other partner and their reciprocal relationship. It should be noted that these techniques build upon one another and what emerges in terms of interpersonal processing is more than the sum of these techniques (Reid et al., 2006).

Additionally, SCCT and the concept of *we-ness* is guided by systemic and constructivist principles. Based on systemic notions a marriage is viewed as a dyadic system that is situated

within a larger context (such as the culture one lives in) and is composed of individual self-systems of the partners (Reid & Ahmad, 2013). The self-systems emerge from many contributing smaller systems such as the individuals' unique biological, genetic and neurological systems (Reid & Ahmad, 2013). Each system, however, is more than the sum of its parts (Reid & Ahmad, 2013). As such, a marriage is an emergent phenomenon that is more than the combination of the self-systems of the partners who are in it (Ahmad, 2012). Hence, through focus on *we-ness* or interpersonal processing in SCCT an attempt is made to help partners broaden their understanding of their relationship by enhancing their self knowledge, partner's knowledge and how they impact each other reciprocally (Doell, 2010; Reid et. al, 2006). In other words, the partners are aided to recognize and become aware of the systems at work in their relationship and their interaction. Moreover, according to constructivist theories, the partners that are participating in the marital system are constantly construing and giving meaning to the experiences within their relationship. The focus of SCCT on strengthening *we-ness* in a couple leads to increased knowledge and information about self, the other and the reciprocal interaction of the two. This broadened knowledge then becomes part of the information each partner uses to construe and frame their experiences in the relationship (Reid et al., 2006). Much change in the quality of the relationship occurs through this reframing of experiences by the partners (Ahmad, 2012).

In SCCT, the problems couples present are viewed as a byproduct of the distress in the relationship. A useful metaphor that captures this idea is the figure-ground illusion (Reid et al., 2008). The problems couples experience are akin to the figure. In SCCT, the work of therapy is focused on the background which is the couple's level of *we-ness*. Once the background of the relationship improves, the problems will either dissolve or become much easier to deal with



(Reid et al., 2006). Specifically, in SCCT, only the initial one or two sessions are focused on identifying the problems that motivated the couple to seek therapy. Once the difficulties are discussed by the couple and the goals for therapy are established, the remaining sessions are focused on improving the quality of the relationship the couple shares with each other (Reid et al., 2008). When the problems are re-visited in the final session it is often the case that the problems have resolved or the couple feels confident that they are able to figure out a solution that suits their unique relationship together (Reid et al., 2008).

In SCCT the individuals in a couple are viewed as the experts regarding their own relationship (Reid et al., 2008). The therapist's function is merely to help the couple explore their understanding of the dynamics of their marriage in order to come up with solutions to their difficulties that would work within their own unique marriage. This is consistent with systemic principles that contend that change happens best from within a system (Reid et al., 2006). As such, the dyadic system between the partners is supported to explore and generate its own novel solutions that would work effectively within its own dynamics.

### **The Present Study and the Hypotheses**

For the purposes of the current study, the investigators (a clinical psychologist and a graduate student) conducted four sessions of relationship enhancement workshops based on SCCT principles and techniques. These SCCT techniques (and any modifications to them) are explained in detail in the Methods section. Our goal in this workshop was to investigate whether implementing these techniques and SCCT principles, which are designed to strengthen the couple's level of *we-ness*, would enhance the quality of the couple's relationship when done in a short-term, structured, group format (rather than one-on-one therapy). Both increased levels of *we-ness* and relationship satisfaction have been obtained through previous studies of SCCT

which incorporates these techniques as part of its protocol (Reid et al, 2006). Relying on these previous findings, the current research does not directly measure *we-ness*. Rather, in this research we implement these SCCT techniques and principles (which have the goal of increasing *we-ness* level) in a workshop setting and measure the outcome through measures of relationship quality.

Five self-report measures were carefully chosen and administered both pre and post participation in the workshop (a full description of these measures is given in the Methods section). Briefly, the first and second instruments were two measures of overall relationship quality and satisfaction: the Revised Relationship Assessment Scale (RRAS) and the Relationship Measure (RM). The third measure was Listening Styles in Committed Relationships (LSCR). According to Doell (2003) there are two modes of listening: listening to understand (LTU) and listening to respond (LTR). In listening to understand, the partner listens to the meaning behind the other partner's words and is actively trying to understand the speaker's experience and perspective. Listening to respond, however, is a more superficial way of listening in which the partner listens just enough to the speaker's words in order to be able to come back with a response. The Listening Styles in Committed Relationships (LSCR) scale is composed of two subscales that measure these two specific modes of listening. The fourth administered measure was the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS). In this measure the participants are presented with different feeling words such as sad and happy and are asked to rate how much they have felt these feelings towards their relationship in the past two weeks. Half of the measure assesses for positive affect and the other half assesses for negative affect. Hence, the measure consists of two subscales: Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA). Finally, the last measure administered was the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS). The IOS

measured the participants' levels of closeness with their partner. It was hypothesized that there would be a significant improvement in the reported ratings of participants in the following areas of couple functioning: relationship quality, listening, feelings towards the relationship and feelings of closeness with one's partner.

Specifically, it was hypothesized that:

- 1) *The couples' levels of reported relationship quality would significantly increase from pre to post workshop measurements on the Revised Relationship Assessment Scale (RRAS).*
- 2) *The couples' levels of reported relationship quality would significantly increase from pre to post workshop measurements on the Relationship Measure (RM).*
- 3) *There would be improvements on the reported levels of couples' quality of listening.*

Specifically:

*3a. There would be a significant increase in the couples' reports on the LSCR- Perception of the partner (both subscales combined) from pre to post workshop phase.*

*3b. Reports of partner's level of listening to understand would significantly increase from the pre to post workshop phase as demonstrated on the LTU subscale.*

*3c. Reports of partner's level of listening to respond would significantly decrease from pre to post workshop phase as demonstrated through the LTR subscale. It should be noted that the questions on this subscale are formatted in a way that higher ratings on this subscale reflect lower tendency to listen to*

*respond. As such, a significant increase on this subscale would provide support for this hypothesis.*

- 4) *There would be significant improvements in the couples' ratings on the PANAS subscales. Specifically:*

*4a. There would be a significant increase in the couples' ratings on the Positive Affect (PA) subscale from pre to post workshop phase.*

*4b. There would be a significant decrease in the couples' ratings on the Negative Affect (NA) subscale. It should be noted that these data were reverse scored. Hence, a significant increase on this measure would provide support for this hypothesis.*

- 5) *There would be a significant increase in the couples' levels of reported closeness as measured by the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) scale from pre to post workshop measurements.*

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Overall, 20 couples participated in this study. Given that each workshop took at least one month to complete and the time limits associated with conducting the research, this sample size was deemed appropriate by the researchers. One couple dropped out from the workshop after attending two sessions. Additionally, four other couples were deemed ineligible for the final analysis in the study and were removed from the final sample. The factors leading to the exclusion of these couples were varied including: English language difficulties, medical difficulties, and attending only 3 out of 4 sessions of the workshop. These exclusion criteria

were applied before undertaking any data analyses. Hence, a sample of 15 couples was used in the final analysis.

The mean age of the overall sample was 40 ( $SD = 11.32$ ) and ranged from 21 to 64 years of age. Sixty percent of the participants were married. The average number of years married was 16.39 ( $SD = 7.64$ ) and ranged from 5 to 30 years. The highest completed level of education in the sample was as follows: 16.7% high school diploma, 16.7% college, 30% bachelor degree, 23.3% masters, 10% professional program and 3.3% PhD. The participants were all fluent in English. In this study, 53.3% of the sample was born in Canada and 46.7% was born outside of Canada.

### **Sampling Procedures**

A variety of different methods were used in this research to let the community know of the workshops that were taking place and to recruit participants for this study. Initially, posters advertising the workshop and its details were created and posted around the university campus where the workshops were taking place. Additionally, a number of the university's secretaries were contacted and asked to email their departmental list serve with the information regarding this research. Recipients of this email were also asked to forward the information to anyone that may find the information useful. Moreover, advertisements of the workshop were placed in a number of community newspapers such as the Toronto Star and Metro. Furthermore, some of the couples in this study were referred by other psychologists who were active in the community and were made aware of this research. Finally, over 1800 doctors' offices, health clinics and community centers in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) were sent a package containing a letter explaining the research and a few posters advertising the workshop. In the mailed letters, the

professionals at these health settings were asked to post the workshop's posters at their centers and let interested couples know about this research.

**Ethics.** This research and the measures used were approved by the Human Participants Review Committee at York University. Additionally, the details of the research were explained to all research participants, as were participants' rights, both verbally and in writing through a detailed consent form at the beginning of the workshop. The consent form explained the study's purpose, procedure, risks, benefits, confidentiality and informed the participants of their rights to withdraw if they choose to.

All participants signed a copy of the consent form and were given another copy for their own records. Moreover, the participants were made aware that the workshops would be provided free of charge, and that they would be reimbursed for their parking costs on campus. To qualify for participation in the research, the participants were asked to complete pre and post workshop questionnaires.

## **Measures**

The following five measures were administered to the participants both pre participation and post completion of the workshop to measure its effectiveness. Specifically, before participating in the workshop the participants were asked to respond to the measures according to their perceptions at that point in time. After completing the workshop the participants were given the same set of measures and were asked to respond according to their perceptions in the last 2 weeks<sup>1</sup>.

### **Relationship quality was assessed through:**

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<sup>1</sup> There were two exceptions to this. The PANAS asked the participants to give a rating based on the previous two weeks during both the pre and post workshop phase. Additionally, the IOS asked the respondents to give a rating according to how they felt at that point in time during both the pre and post workshop phase.

**The Revised Relationship Assessment Scale (RRAS); (Appendix A).** The RRAS is based on minor modifications made to the ENRICH marital satisfaction (EMS) scale (Fowlers & Olson, 1993). The RRAS is highly correlated with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976)  $r = .75$  (Nguyen, 1999), .85 and .78 (Dalton, 2005) and researchers of this study believe it may be a lot more sensitive to detecting small changes in the partners' self-reports of relationship satisfaction than the DAS. The original RRAS is composed of 12 Items. It is reported to have a Cronbach alpha of .83 (Nguyen, 1999), .79 (Reid & Dalton, 2000a and 2000b) and a test-retest reliability of  $r = .76$  (Nguyen, 1999). For the purposes of this research, one of the 12 items was removed from the RRAS. The item taken out reads as follows, "I am pleased about how we express affection and relate sexually." The researchers felt responding to this item may make some respondents feel uncomfortable. Hence, the final RRAS used and administered in the research was composed of 11 items. In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient for this measure was  $\alpha = .85$  (during the pre workshop phase) and  $\alpha = .83$  (during the post workshop phase). Additionally, its test-retest correlation<sup>2</sup> was  $r = .58$ . Some sample items from this measure are "Our relationship is a success" and "My partner and I understand each other perfectly." A scale of 1-5 ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, is used by the respondents to rate each statement. Items: 4, 7, 8 and 11 were reverse scored on this measure in order to obtain overall ratings of the respondents' levels of relationship satisfaction and quality.

**Relationship Measure (RM); (Appendix B).** This measure was created specifically for the purposes of this research in order to pick up on the nuances of anticipated relationship change and enhancement as a result of attending the workshop. The items were drawn from the

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<sup>2</sup> The time span for the test-retest correlations given for all measure, range between approximately 4-8 weeks. This range is due to factors such as some workshops taking longer than 4 weeks to finish and some participants filling out and emailing the questionnaires after the workshops had ended.

researchers' knowledge and intuitions regarding how the workshops will likely impact and alter the relationship dynamics between the partners. Additionally, the items were designed to measure change in areas that the researchers believed the workshop would have an impact on including: communication patterns, understanding, hope, sameness, needs, acceptance, support, unity and companionship. This measure is composed of 22 items. Two sample items from this measure are "I feel my partner is able to understand me" and "It is easy for me to talk with my partner." The respondents are asked to give a rating on a scale of 1-9, ranging from very low to very high, to each statement.

A reliability analysis was conducted for this measure. The measure had a Cronbach alpha of  $\alpha = .94$  (for the pre workshop phase) and  $\alpha = .97$  (for the post workshop phase). Further analysis of the item-total statistics table showed that all 22 items correlated well with the measure as a whole and contributed to the Cronbach alpha. Additionally the test-retest correlation of this measure was  $r = .52$ .

### **Quality of listening was assessed through:**

**The Listening Styles in Committed Relationships Scale (LSCR-Perceptions of Partner; Doell, 2003); (Appendix C).** The LSCR measures two styles of listening as described by Doell (2003). The first style is listening to understand in which the listener attempts to explore and become more in tune with the speaker's world including the meaning and feeling behind the speaker's words. The second style is referred to as listening to respond and is characterized by a more superficial mode of listening and occasional interruptions (for a full description of both listening styles see the description of the workshop section below). The measure is composed of 18 items and is broken down into two 9-item subscales. The first subscale measures the level of listening to understand (LTU) with items such as "If my partner is



unclear about what I am saying, he/she will ask for more detail.” The second subscale measures the level of listening to respond (LTR) with items such as “When I am talking to my partner, I find that he/she is easily distracted.” The respondents are asked to give a rating on a scale of 1-7 to each item ranging from a score of 1 reflecting always and a score of 7 reflecting never. When analysing the results of this study, the LTU subscale items were reverse scored so that higher scores reflect higher levels of listening to understand. Additionally, there are two parts to this measure: LSCR-Perception of self and the LSCR-Perception of partner. Essentially, the respondents are asked to respond to the first part of the measure (LSCR) with regards to their own listening style and respond to the second part (LSCR-Perception of partner) with regards to their partner’s listening styles. Both parts are made of the exact same 18 items with modifications made to the sentence structure in order to reflect the respondent’s own listening style or his/her perceptions of the partner’s listening style. For the purposes of this study, only the second part (LSCR-Perception of partner) was administered.

In this study, during the pre workshop phase, the Cronbach alpha for the LSCR-Perception of partner was  $\alpha = .89$  (for the LTU subscale),  $\alpha = .89$  (for the LTR subscale) and  $\alpha = .93$  (for the scale as a whole). In the post workshop phase, the Cronbach alpha for LSCR-Perception of partner was  $\alpha = .92$  (for the LTU subscale),  $\alpha = .87$  (for the LTR subscale) and  $\alpha = .93$  (for the scale as whole). The test-retest correlation for this measure was  $r = .84$  (for the whole scale),  $r = .43$  (for the LTU subscale) and  $r = .49$  (for the LTR subscale).

#### **Affect in the relationship was assessed through:**

**The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988); (Appendix D).** This measure consists of 20 words that describe possible feelings the respondent may be experiencing in his/her relationship. Specifically, 10 words describe positive

affect such as “excited” and “proud” and the other 10 words describe negative affect such as “irritable” and “scared.” Hence, the measure consists of two subscales: the Positive Affect (PA) subscale and the Negative Affect (NA) subscale. The respondent is asked to rate each item according to how much each word reflects his/her internal experience and feelings regarding the relationship in a given time span; in this study, it was their feelings during the past two weeks. The scale ranges from 1-5 with a score of 1 reflecting “very slightly or not at all” and a score of 5 reflecting “extremely”. Watson et al (1988) has demonstrated that the two subscales are not significantly correlated with each other ( $r = -.22$ ) indicating they are different dimensions of emotional affect. As such, the two subscales are analysed separately in this study.

The participants’ responses to PANAS items forming the Negative Affect subscale (items: 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15, 18 and 20) were reverse scored. Hence, significant increases on this subscale would reflect lower negative affect in the relationship.

Watson et al. (1988) reported the Cronbach alpha for the Positive Affect subscale of the measure is .88 and it has a test/re-test reliability of  $r = .68$  over 8 weeks. Moreover, the reported Cronbach alpha for the Negative Affect subscale of the measure is .87 with a test/retest reliability of .71 over 8 weeks (Watson et al., 1988).

During the pre workshop phase of this study, the Cronbach alpha was  $\alpha = .86$  (for Positive Affect subscale),  $\alpha = .88$  (for the Negative Affect subscale). A further scale analysis, however, showed that item 12 was not contributing to the Positive Affect subscale. For this item, the respondents are asked to give a rating of how ‘alert’ they have felt in their relationship in the last two weeks. An analysis of the item-total statistics table showed that item 12’s corrected item-total correlation was  $r = .009$  (for the Positive Affect subscale which it was a part of). The Positive Affect subscale’s Cronbach alpha if this item was deleted became  $\alpha = .89$ .

During the post workshop phase of this study, the Cronbach alpha was  $\alpha = .81$  (for the Positive Affect subscale),  $\alpha = .88$  (for the Negative Affect subscale). As well, during this phase, item 12 did not correlate well with the rest of the items in the Positive Affect subscale as indicated by the corrected item-total correlation ( $r = .13$ ). The removal of item 12 led to an increase in the Cronbach alpha of the Positive Affect subscale ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

Hence, item 12 was removed from the scale and the data analysis proceeded with the remaining 19 items. In this study, the test-retest correlation was  $r = .36$  (for the modified 9-item Positive Affect subscale) and  $r = .56$  (for the Negative Affect subscale).

#### **Closeness in the relationship was assessed through:**

**The Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS Scale; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992); (Appendix E).** This single item measure is intended to measure interpersonal closeness by exhibiting 7 different Venn diagrams. The Venn diagrams range from two circles that are completely separated (Venn diagram 1) to largely overlapped (as in Venn diagram 7). The respondents are asked to choose the diagram which best reflects their experience of their relationship. The IOS demonstrated a test-retest correlation of  $r = .25$  in this study.

The following two questionnaires were also filled out by the participants to gain additional information:

**Demographic Information.** A demographic questionnaire was completed by each participant before the start of the workshop. The demographic information was gathered in part to give further consideration as to the applicability of the results of this research including the viability of utilizing the workshop form of SCCT psychological intervention to a broader population.

**Workshop Feedback (Appendix F).** This form was filled out at the end of the workshop in order to learn from the participants and their unique experiences and perspectives of the workshop. The form included five open-ended questions which provided the participants with an opportunity to communicate their personal perspectives on the benefits, drawbacks of the workshop and how it can be improved.

### **Description of the Workshop**

This research was designed as a single group, within-subject, pre-post study. Overall, 11 workshops were conducted over a span of eight months. Each workshop consisted of four 3-hour sessions and generally took one month to complete. There were, however, some accommodations made depending on the unique needs of each couple. For instance, some workshops took longer than 4 weeks to complete for a variety reasons such as some couples' inability to attend certain dates. There were two co-facilitators for the workshop present during all sessions. The first facilitator was a registered clinical psychologist and a professor. His previous clinical and academic work has led to the development of SCCT (Reid et al., 2006). The second facilitator was a graduate student in the clinical psychology program, being trained and supervised by the first facilitator.

One to two couples were assigned to each workshop. One exception was made for a couple that arranged with the facilitators to join two other couples from another workshop for only one session as this date worked best with their schedule. That session proceeded with three couples. Two major reasons contributed to keeping the number of couples low for each workshop. First, it was difficult to recruit couples that were interested and able to attend all four sessions of the workshop during the limited time allocated to the study. Second, given that this was the first time these workshops were being run, the facilitators preferred to have smaller

groups with which they would be able to work more closely and give individual attention. It was decided that once the effectiveness of the workshop was established with this study, the workshop could then be evaluated again with the participation of more couples at a given time.

**The general format of the sessions.** The initial part of each session (with the exception of Session 1) was dedicated to a review of the principles learned in the preceding session and how the couples' assigned practice at home had proceeded. After this review and homework discussion, the session continued with a PowerPoint presentation of the topic for that day. The participants had a chance to learn about the topic, pose questions and discuss it in the group setting. After this learning period, the couples were guided to small nearby private rooms in which they were asked to exercise what they had just learned by applying it to their relationship. For instance, the focus of Session 1 was on learning to listen to understand one's partner (this topic is explained in more detail later). After learning about what listening to understand was, the couples were asked to go into the private rooms and take turns talking about topics of importance while their partner would practice listening to understand them on the topics. As this practice was taking place, one of the co-facilitators would come into the room and work with the couple to ensure that they were progressing and the skills learned were being implemented. It should be noted that although the focus and topic discussed in each of the four sessions was different, the learning via PowerPoint, the discussion and the practice format was the same for all four sessions. After the couples had finished their practice in the private rooms, they were then invited to come back to the main room and discuss as a group the topic of the day and what they were learning. This conversation was centered on general learning and understanding to ensure that the details of what the couples were discussing in the private rooms were kept confidential and not discussed in the group setting. All sessions ended with informing the couples of the

topic to be discussed the following week, encouraging them to be sure to practice what they were learning when together during the week and providing them with reimbursement for the cost for their parking on campus.

In addition to the above, Sessions 1 and 4, the beginning and ending sessions of the workshop, were composed of a few extra components worth noting. Session 1 began with an introduction to the workshop, the facilitators and the reasoning behind the workshop. The participants were made aware of some of the empirical findings from SCCT and how these findings were incorporated into the workshop they were attending. Additionally, the participants were informed about the workshop by the facilitators who took time to explain and go over a consent form with them. The participants read and signed this form before proceeding with the workshop and received one copy of it to take home with them for their own records. Once familiarized with the workshop and its format, the participants were asked to fill out a few measures in order for the researchers to get an indication of their perception of their relationship before proceeding with the workshop. It should be noted that in attempts to save time, the participants were emailed the Demographic Information form as well as the RRAS and the IOS questionnaires beforehand and were asked to fill them out and bring them to the workshop with them. Hence, these were collected and the other questionnaires were completed at the workshop.

Session 4 was also comprised of additional components. In this session, after going over the topic and practice for the day, the participants were asked to fill out the same measures they had filled out prior to the beginning of the workshop. They were asked to do this in order to track their progress and the effectiveness of the workshop. Moreover, the 4th session finished with an end of workshop discussion during which one of the facilitators highlighted the significance of the work that the couples had put into the workshop over the preceding weeks.

Additionally, there was a discussion surrounding the possibility of occurrence of future obstacles and how to use the skills learned to approach these potential difficulties. The couples were also reminded that they would be contacted for a follow-up in 6 to 8 weeks.

**The specific focus of each session.** The following paragraphs detail the content of each of the four sessions of the workshop.

*Session 1: Listening to understand versus listening to respond.* The focus of the first session was on enhancing the listening skills of the participants. This session was based on two styles of listening, listening to understand versus listening to respond, previously identified, established and elaborated by Doell (1997; 2003). These listening styles are explicitly identified and distinguished in SCCT by the therapist followed by practice. Similarly, in the first session of the workshop these two modes of listening were identified and a lot of time was invested in helping couples practice their listening to understand skills. What follows is a description of what was discussed with the couples during the first session.

*Listening to respond.* Listening to respond is a way of listening that most people likely engage in many times during the day. In this way of listening, the person listens to the words of the speaker and responds accordingly with his/her own interpretation of the words in an automatic fashion. The benefit to this way of responding is that it is quite efficient and matches the fast-paced lives of most individuals in which they need to attend and respond to matters quickly. Although this way of listening can be adaptive in the context of the current fast-paced world, it can become a hindrance to creating a close bond within intimate relationships. Especially when the listener fails to understand what the speaker means and feels about the topic they are attempting to convey.

A major sign of listening to respond is interruption. Interruptions can occur for a variety of reasons such as when the words of the speaker cause a reaction within the listener that is hard to let go of and to continue with attentive listening. This especially happens when the topic being spoken about is one that is quite meaningful and important to both partners but they may have differing views on it. Hence hearing this different perspective may cause a strong emotional reaction inside the listener that may lead to cutting off the speaker by interrupting him/her and presenting one's own views.

Although interruptions can be outward manifestations of listening to respond, a more internal and subtle sign of listening to respond is when the listener is quiet while the speaker talks but is not really listening to or processing what is being said. The quietness is more a sign of courtesy, rather than listening, and the person is merely waiting for the speaker to be done talking so that he/she can get a chance to present his/her views. Alternatively, the silence may be due to the listener's preoccupation with their own thoughts and feelings, triggered by the speaker's words. The listener may be quiet but attending to their own thoughts rather than actively processing what the speaker is thinking and feeling as they speak. There is the saying that one only hears one's interpretation of what the other is saying, not what the other is actually saying.

Another sign of listening to respond is when the listener feels that he/she already knows what the speaker is going to say and as such is not attentive to his/her message. Alternatively, in listening to respond the listener may listen just enough to the speaker's message to be able to provide a response at the expense of not getting the nuances of the message being delivered.

Additionally, a factor that contributes to the strengthening and manifestation of listening to respond is the assumption that staying quiet and actively listening conveys the message that



one agrees with what is being said. Hence, the listener feels the internal pressure to give voice to his/her perspective. Being engaged with one's own perspective however, rather than listening to what is actually being conveyed by the speaker, may lead to a very unfulfilling and frustrating experience for both partners who are trying hard to have their perspectives heard and understood. Hence, in training couples on different ways of listening during the workshops, the couples were reminded that listening to and understanding one's partner's perspective does not mean that one has to agree with it.

Moreover, an individual talking to a partner who is only engaged in listening to respond may feel quite dismissed and invalidated. This is because the partner's responses and interruptions may make the speaker feel that he/she is failing with the attempts to articulate his/her experience and perspective. As a result, the speaker may end up feeling quite frustrated and invalidated by the inappropriate feedback or lack thereof and give up trying. This giving up, however, may create a distance between the partners as they do not get a chance to feel heard or understood by each other. Alternatively, the listener's responses and interruptions may make the speaker feel attacked and put him/her in a defensive mode. The speaker may start to feel like he/she has to justify his/her perspective and position, rather than have the freedom to explore it and think out loud in the partner's presence.

*Listening to understand.* A second mode of listening, one which breeds intimacy and connection between the partners, is called listening to understand. In listening to understand, the partner adopts a curious stance in which he/she facilitates the exploration of his/her partner's perspective and experience. The listener attempts to explore and build an appreciation for the speaker's world by going behind the surface of their words and trying to understand how they may feel or think. It is helpful to imagine the speaker's experience as an iceberg that is mostly

submerged in deep water. The speaker's word is analogous to the tip of this iceberg that can be seen above the surface of the water. However, just like the iceberg has a much bigger portion hidden in the water, there is so much more behind a person's words. In listening to understand the listener tries to explore what the underlying meaning of the words are for the speaker.

There are many signs that listening to understand is taking place such as when the listener asks a lot of open ended questions; questions that pull for more expression of the speaker's ideas and perspectives. These questions are helpful as they help the speaker think even more about his/her perspective in the attempt to articulate even more about it. In contrast to closed-ended questions which require a yes or no answer, open-ended ones can stimulate further thinking and processing and help support the speaker in bringing forth his/her experience and perspective. In addition, another sign indicative of listening to understand is that the listener is continuously following the speaker's lead and does not attempt to take over or steer the conversation in a particular direction. As such, the speaker gets an opportunity to follow his/her own sense and freely express what naturally comes up for him/her. Moreover, the listener adopts a curious and nonjudgmental stance in which he/she attempts to learn more from the speaker and his/her experience. In this process of listening to understand, it is natural and normal for the listener to have a number of reactions come up that may push for expression. This is especially likely if the speaker is talking about something that relates to the listener but he/she has differing views on and feels differently about. In such cases, the listener may repeatedly feel the urge to interrupt the speaker and express his/her own views on the subject. Hence, another sign of listening to understand is to repeatedly pause one's reactions and continuing to actively listen and understand reality as experienced by the speaker.

When listening to understand is taking place the emergent experience shared between the two partners has a number of associated qualities. For example, the speaker may feel a sense of freedom to express his/her thoughts, feelings and experience without the added pressure of constantly having to defend or justify it. Additionally, the attention and efforts of the listener to understand the speaker may lead to him/her feeling cared for and supported. It is likely that as a result of this more receptive and supportive atmosphere, the speaker may feel that he/she can free associate in the presence of the partner. Sometimes as a result of this thinking out loud the speaker may come to newer understandings of him/herself that he/she had not thought of before. In addition, the listener who is highly tuned in to the speaker's experience may intuitively offer tentative understandings about the speaker that may fit and add to the speaker's understandings of him/herself. As such, the process may lead to increased self-awareness in the speaker with the added benefit of having one's partner being a witness to it. Being seen and heard at a deep level by another is a very validating experience that reduces an individual's sense of aloneness and strengthens the bond between the partners. Also, it should be noted that listening to understand shared by both partners can facilitate an attitude of openness between the partners which may help guide the conversation to a place that it has not gone before. Finally, listening to understand facilitates the strengthening of the bond between the partners by allowing them an opportunity to see deeper into one another's experience and to connect more.

***Session 2: Perspective taking.*** The second session of the workshop was based on the "internalized partner" technique implemented in SCCT (Reid et al., 2006) which itself is rooted in and similar to the ideas of 'interviewing the internalized other' by Tomm (1988). In the "internalized partner" technique, which usually takes place during the later sessions of SCCT, one of the partners is interviewed by the therapist while he/she imagines being the other partner.

The therapist asks the partner questions regarding topics that he/she has heard his/her partner talk about during the preceding sessions but also topics that have not been raised or discussed yet. This is done in order to compel the client to think deeper about his/her partner's experience and not just summarize what his/her partner has previously said (Ahmad, 2012). A post dialogue discussion follows this exercise in therapy, in order for both partners to share their experiences and thoughts regarding the exercise with each other.

For the purposes of this session, some modifications were made to this technique (which is implemented in SCCT and described above) in order to better fit the workshop format. Moreover, these modifications were based on the researchers' own understandings and intuitive knowledge of how taking the other's perspective (i.e., perspective taking) can help bring the couples closer. This integrating of each other's perspectives and feelings and ways of thinking is expected to strengthen the psychological foundation of the couples interpersonal system (ie. *Wenness*) which is part of the intent of this workshop. The following paragraphs describe the format and ideas presented in the second session of the workshop.

This session focused on deepening the understanding of one's partner through perspective taking. Specifically, the participants were asked to think of a topic that is a source of conflict or disagreement between them as a couple. Then they were asked to imagine that they are their partner and talk about the topic from their partner's perspective for approximately 15 minutes while their partner listened. Before the commencement of the exercise, however, the participants were reminded that it is very difficult to put oneself in another person's shoes and to truly get all aspects of his/her experience. As such, the goal of the exercise was to attempt to grasp as much of the partner's perspective as possible by using one's intuitions and accumulated knowledge of one's partner over the years. Additionally, the participants were encouraged to try

to consider and articulate their partner's rational as well as experiential processing such as their thoughts, feelings, intuitions, wishes, dreams and expectations regarding the issue. This is because all these aspects combined give rise to a person's experience and in order to understand another person better it becomes important to become aware of and tap into all of them.

The individual doing the perspective taking was also asked to record his/her voice while doing the exercise. The purpose of the recording was to serve as a potential memory aid during the planned post exercise dialogue by providing the couple with an opportunity to hear back parts of the exercise if need be. Most of the times, however, the recording was not needed as the dialogue happened right after the 15-minute perspective taking exercise and it was fresh in each partner's mind. During this post exercise dialogue, each partner was asked to speak about his/her experience of the exercise, what stood out the most and what were the challenging aspects. Also, the partner who listened to the other take his/her perspective had an opportunity to provide feedback to the partner regarding what was said. The participants were reminded, however, that this was not an evaluation of their partner. Rather, the feedback was an opportunity to let their partners know about their experience and for them to become closer and build intimacy as the result. Although it is easy to blame one's partner for not knowing or being wrong about an aspect of one's experience, the reasoning behind this lack of knowledge can be more complicated. For example, it could be the case that some individuals are relatively less open about their experiences than others and as such their partners have fewer opportunities to learn and get to know their partners. Therefore, rather than pointing fingers and finding faults with each other, the deficiency in a partner's knowledge of the other is treated as an area to be further explored and discussed together.

It should be noted that although the attempt to take one's partner's perspective was intentional and deliberate during the session, the goal of the workshop was for this to become more automatic with time. The participants were reminded that with repeated practice, perspective taking will become a more natural part of each partner's way of responding to the other especially when differences of opinion come up or more understanding is needed.

There are many benefits to this exercise. For instance, it is common for the partner who is practicing being his/her partner to report feeling more empathy and compassion for the other partner as result of going through this exercise. Somehow, listening to oneself repeat and articulate what the partner is going through gives one more of a sense of how ones partner is impacted by his/her experiences. In addition, the partner who is quiet and listening to the other partner attempt to be him/her benefits from getting a sense of how he/she has been coming across to the partner. Sometimes, the experience could be very reassuring and validating as the individual hears the partner articulate his/her exact feelings, thoughts and experiences. In fact, in some cases the partner may articulate feelings and thoughts associated with the subject that really resonates with the other partner who is listening but he/she had not thought of it before. In other words, it could be the case that the partner such as the husband may connect a few dots in the wife's experience that she had not seen before and as such provide a new way of looking at and sensing her experiences. The extra value of the preceding is that she gets her turn as well to 'be him' and then the two of them discuss the experience. Of course, there will likely be many mismatches between what is being said and the partner's actual experiences. The post exercise dialogue allows for these areas to be discussed as well.

***Session 3: Topic avoidance.*** The researchers designed this third session based on their combined clinical and scientific understanding of how avoidance of communication about topics

that are both important but difficult to discuss can impact relationships negatively. In addition, SCCT's "thinking and speaking in the third person" technique is utilized in this session (described below). Moreover, it should also be noted that the third session further builds upon and strengthens the couples' level of *we-ness* and interpersonal processing. Specifically, the couples are encouraged to become increasingly aware of themselves in their relationship and their reciprocal interaction and impact on each other during times of conflict. Below is a description of the key ideas in this session that were articulated to the participants during the workshop presentation and their practice.

During the course of most relationships, it is likely that topics will come up that become quite challenging to discuss between the partners. Most of the times these are topics that are personally meaningful to both partners but they tend to feel very differently about. As such when they attempt to discuss their perspectives on the topic, they can quickly become emotional, aggravated and defensive. These topics can become a source of argument or tension between the couple and as a result are rarely or never discussed. The problem with this avoidance, however, is that it can decrease the intimacy between the partners and cause distance between them.

A couple may experience difficulty discussing a number of important topics such as finances, child rearing or interaction with the in-laws. Although the content of the topics that a couple has difficulty talking to each other about can be varied, their interaction and patterns of discussion surrounding these difficult topics tend to be similar. Often times, these interactions surrounding difficult topics can become negative cycles to which both partners contribute and they result in such an aversive experience that the partners may end up preferring not to discuss the topic any further. Hence, the challenges associated with the hard topic itself (such as financial difficulties, child discipline or interaction with the in-laws) tend to be exacerbated by

the negative patterns of interaction that occurs surrounding the topic or issue needing to be discussed. The goal of the third session of the workshop is to help couples take steps towards being able to talk more comfortably with each other when hard topics arise. This goal is accomplished through two steps in this session as outlined below.

*Step 1: Becoming more aware of the negative interactions surrounding the discussion of hard topics.* First, the couples take some time discussing together their experiences with each other when they are in the midst of discussing difficult topics. They may talk about how they react to each other and what feelings come up for them in the process. But they must do this without sliding into arguing by keeping a form of emotional control or distance so that they can talk about how they normally behave, mutually identifying their patterns that complicate even starting to discuss important issues.

Additionally, the couples are asked to have this discussion while talking in the third person. This requires the couple to refer to themselves (and each other) by their first names rather than saying ‘I’ or ‘you’. Essentially the couple has this conversation as though they are talking about two other individuals. This technique, referred to as “thinking and speaking in the third person”, is developed by and discussed in Reid et al. (2006). Speaking in the third person has many benefits. Specifically, it helps each partner to remain more objective and hear what the other partner is saying without getting too defensive. Additionally, it helps the partners to talk about their problems in a more detached fashion and look at their interaction from a more removed perspective. Rather than taking what is being discussed personally, this technique helps the partners regulate their emotions more easily by creating some distance between them and their difficulties interacting as a couple.



Overall, the goal in this first step is to shed some light on the negative interaction that occurs when there are hard topics to discuss. By having a dialogue about their reactions to each other and how they are impacted by and affect each other in the midst of discussing difficult topics, the partners become more aware of their unique ways of interacting and learn more about themselves as a couple. The couples are asked to avoid getting into the details of difficult topics during this discussion and instead put their focus on *how* they talk to each other when they try.

*Step 2: Taking steps towards creating new patterns of interaction when there are hard topics to discuss.* Once the couple is more aware of how they impact each other and reach a point where discussion of hard topics become difficult they are now in a position to be able to create change. In this part of the workshop, the couples have a discussion with each other about possible changes they could make in their behavior, thinking or verbalizations that would be helpful to them during these challenging discussions. For example, realizing more clearly how one's anger and yelling impacts the partner, the individual may suggest that next time he/she feels anger he/she will walk away rather than yell and re-raise the topic when in a more calm state. Alternatively, another person may think of times during the day when he/she tends to be more relaxed and ask his/her partner to pick those times to bring up challenging topics. What works for one individual may not work for another. As such, each partner is encouraged to think not only of changes he/she can make that fit in with his/her unique personality, but also they will likely be able to make those changes. A major benefit of doing this work is that once the cycle is altered it then can be applied to a range of topics that are usually avoided. This is because most often this cycle of interaction has the same pattern around various difficult topics.

***Session 4: Ideal relationship.*** The fourth session utilizes the ideal relationship technique that is implemented in SCCT. Specifically, during SCCT the partners, with the aid of the

therapist, create a list of the attributes of their ideal relationship and articulate their ideas to each other. The couples then are asked to see if they can agree to merge their two lists into one list. Once this combined list is obtained, the couples have a dialogue about actions they each can take to bring them closer to their mutual ideal relationship and how they can support each other in this endeavor. Similarly, in this session of the workshop, the focus was on taking steps towards the ideal relationship for the couples. Below is a description of the ideas that were presented to the couples during this session.

Each participant was asked to prepare and bring a list of the attributes of their ideal relationship to this session. They were instructed, beforehand, that when composing this list they should pay attention to creating a list of an *ideal relationship* not the *ideal partner*. It was important for the participants to think in relational terms and the ideal relationship rather than creating a list of attributes that the other partner has to have. A relationship results from the union and interaction of two individuals. Therefore, each person contributes to the creation of the relationship as a whole. Hence, instead of naming qualities they would like their partners to have, the participants were encouraged to think about what it would feel like to be in this imagined ideal relationship and what the likely characteristics of this relationship were.

During the session the participants were asked to get together with their partner and go over their created lists with each other. The participants were instructed to ask their partner about items on the list that were too general or somehow unclear to them. The goal was to unpack the partner's words and really understand the underlying meaning of the words the partner had used to describe his/her ideal relationship. Their previous experience in listening to understand would contribute to their listening closely to each other's meanings when they conveyed what an ideal relationship would be like for them.

Once the partners had a chance to fully explore each other's lists they were asked if they could agree to merge their two lists and re-name the emergent list as our ideal relationship. It should be noted that the choice was either to agree to merge both lists completely or not merge them at all. Specifically, they could not pick only some items from their partner's list and leave out others they did not like.

Once this combined list was produced, the couples were then in a position to use it as a goal and direction for their relationship. At this point, the couples were reminded of the importance of changing one's own behavior to enhance the relationship rather than the common mistake of trying hard to change one's partner. Following this, the partners were asked to come up with one new behavior they could do in the coming week that would benefit their relationship and bring them closer to their combined ideal relationship list. Additionally, the participants were asked to pick only one behavior and set realistic goals by picking a behavior that is natural for them and they were likely to be able to do consistently. Furthermore, the partners were asked to think of something their partner may be able to do that could support them in achieving the goal they had set for themselves in the coming week and ask their partner if they would be able to do that. Importantly, the participants were reminded that the behaviors they were setting as goals for themselves were completely their own responsibility regardless of whether their partner was able to help them in the process or not.

Additionally, the couples were informed that a major benefit of this session was that it helped them set a common goal for their relationship and start taking actions towards this mutually desired goal. As such, basing the last session of the workshop on this technique was seen as beneficial and helpful to the couples who were completing the workshop and wanted to continue working towards enhancing their relationship. Having this combined list of the ideal

relationship, which was unique to each couple, gave them a map to follow even after the workshop was over.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

When examining the data of the participants in this study, it became evident that 6 individuals had missed a few items when filling out their measures. In these cases, an average of their filled out responses on that specific measure was obtained and used as a value for the unfilled items. This was seen as an appropriate course of action because most of these measures had 85% or more of their items filled out <sup>3</sup>.

Additionally, when investigating the results of research with couples a common question that comes up is whether the scores of individuals within a couple can be treated as independent in order to use parametric statistical models in the analysis. For the purposes of analysing the results of the current study, a decision was made to obtain a mean score for each couple and proceed with dyadic analysis. This decision was primarily based on the recommendation that when working with fewer than 25 couples it is best to assume that the scores of individuals within a couple are not independent (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). As such, the independence assumption would be violated when using parametric tests such as t-testing with individual responses. The following analyses are based on the scores of 15 couples.

An exploration of the data was conducted before proceeding with hypothesis testing. The descriptive statistics for these measures, including the mean and standard deviation are shown in table 1. Next, the data were examined to see if they were normally distributed by a visual

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<sup>3</sup> There were two exceptions. Specifically participant #5 had filled out approximately 65% of the LSCR measure in the pre-workshop phase. Additionally participant # 11 had filled out approximately 77% of the PA subscale of the PANAS in the pre-workshop phase. As well in both of these cases, the average ratings for the filled out items were obtained and inserted for the missing values.

examination of the histograms and the Q-Q plots. Additionally, the values for kurtosis and skewness of data were also examined. Finally, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality was conducted. Overall, the results showed that data for all measures were normally distributed with the exception of one measure. During the post workshop phase, the relationship measure (RM) deviated slightly from normal  $D(15) = .217, P = .055$ .

Moreover, the extreme scores and the outliers for each of the measures were identified and the box plots were examined. This investigation led to locating atypical scores on a few measures. The investigators believe a number of factors may have led to these extreme scores. For example, the respondents may have truly been atypical of the rest of the sample on that measure. Alternatively, it is possible that some respondents may have been confused and unclear about what the measure was asking them about. Ultimately, however, a decision was made not to transform or exclude any of the data regardless of their place relative to the rest of the distribution. This decision was primarily based on the reasoning that if significant effects can be observed in this study despite some of the extreme or atypical scores then even more confidence could be put into how robust the effects of the workshop were. This research was an exploration of how empirical findings from the laboratory can be applied to the community with all its atypical features and anomalies. By keeping these atypical scores included in our sample, it would be more representative of the community as a whole and the purity of the data and potential generality of the results to subsequent samples of couples would be maintained.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for all Measures*

| Measure | <u>Pre-workshop</u>      |           | <u>Post- workshop</u> |           |
|---------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|-----------|
|         | Mean ( $\pm$ SD)         | Min – Max | Mean ( $\pm$ SD)      | Min- Max  |
| RRAS    | 32.44 ( $\pm$ 7.61)      | 23 – 51   | 38.53 ( $\pm$ 6.80)   | 23 – 51   |
| RM      | 121.90<br>( $\pm$ 28.74) | 69 – 178  | 150.97 ( $\pm$ 23.74) | 100 – 185 |
| LSCR    | 66.90 ( $\pm$ 15.24)     | 46 – 99   | 74.33 ( $\pm$ 11.73)  | 54– 98    |
| LTU     | 34.73 ( $\pm$ 7.81 )     | 20- 50    | 42.17 ( $\pm$ 7.51 )  | 28- 53    |
| LTR     | 32.17 ( $\pm$ 7.89)      | 20- 49    | 40.40 ( $\pm$ 5.42)   | 29- 49    |
| PA      | 26.27 ( $\pm$ 6.27)      | 15- 36    | 33.37 ( $\pm$ 3.50)   | 26- 39    |
| NA      | 34.70 ( $\pm$ 7.51)      | 25- 49    | 41.17 ( $\pm$ 6.34)   | 25- 49    |
| IOS     | 3.57 ( $\pm$ 1.294)      | 2 – 6     | 4.63 ( $\pm$ 1.043)   | 3 – 6     |

*Note.* RRAS = Revised Relationship Assessment Scale, RM = Relationship Measure, LSCR = Listening Styles in committed Relationships-perception of partner, LTU = Listening to Understand subscale of the LSCR, LTR = Listening to Respond subscale of the LSCR (items of this subscale are formatted in a way that higher scores reflect a lower tendency to listen to respond), PA = Positive Affect subscale of the PANAS, NA = Negative Affect subscale of the PANAS (data from this subscale were reverse scored. Hence higher NA scores reflect less negative affect in the relationship), IOS = Inclusion of Other in Self Scale.

*n* = 15

## Analysis Plan

A paired t-test was run for the analysis of hypotheses 1-5. However, as previously indicated, one of the measures in the post workshop phase was not normally distributed. Since this violates the normality assumption for t-testing an additional non-parametric analysis was done for this measure as presented in the results for hypothesis 2.

## Hypothesis Tests

1. The first hypothesis was supported. There was a significant increase from pre ( $M = 32.44$ ,  $SE = 1.96$ ) to post workshop ( $M = 38.53$ ,  $SE = 1.75$ ) in the reports of relationship quality of the couples as measured by the Revised Relationship Assessment Scale (RRAS),  $t(14) = -3.56$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .68$ .
2. The second hypothesis was supported. There was a significant increase in the couples' reported levels of relationship enhancement as evaluated by the Relationship Measure (RM) from pre ( $M = 121.90$ ,  $SE = 7.42$ ) to post workshop ( $M = 150.97$ ,  $SE = 6.13$ ),  $t(14) = -4.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .75$ . As mentioned previously, since the post measure data for RM were slightly negatively skewed an additional non-parametric test was conducted. The Wilcoxon signed-ranked test also demonstrated that there was significant increase in the couples' reported levels of relationship enhancement,  $z = -3.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = -.54$ .
3. The third hypothesis was supported. Specifically,
  - 3a. There was a significant increase in the reports on the LSCR-Perception of partner from pre ( $M = 66.90$ ,  $SE = 3.93$ ) to post workshop ( $M = 74.33$ ,  $SE = 3.02$ ) phase,  $t(14) = -3.53$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .68$ .

- 3b. There was a significant increase in the couples' ratings on the Listening to Understand (LTU) subscale from the pre ( $M = 34.73$ ,  $SE = 2.01$ ) to post workshop ( $M = 42.17$ ,  $SE = 1.94$ ) phase,  $t(14) = -3.53$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .68$ .
- 3c. There was significant increase in the couples' ratings on the Listening to Respond (LTR) subscale from pre ( $M = 32.17$ ,  $SE = 2.03$ ) to post workshop ( $M = 40.40$ ,  $SE = 1.40$ ) phase,  $t(14) = -4.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .77$ . As mentioned earlier, the questions in the LTR subscale were formatted in a way that higher scores reflected a lower tendency to listen to respond.
4. The fourth hypothesis was supported. Specifically,
- 4a. There was a significant increase in the reports on the Positive Affect (PA) subscale of the PANAS from pre ( $M = 26.27$ ,  $SE = 1.62$ ) to post workshop ( $M = 33.37$ ,  $SE = .90$ ) phase,  $t(14) = -4.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .77$ .
- 4b. There was a significant increase in the reports on the Negative Affect (NA) subscale of the PANAS from pre ( $M = 34.70$ ,  $SE = 1.93$ ) to post workshop ( $M = 41.17$ ,  $SE = 1.63$ ) phase,  $t(14) = -3.81$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .51$ . As mentioned earlier, the data for the Negative Affect (NA) subscale were reverse scored. Hence, a significant increase on this subscale reflects lower negative affect with regards to the relationship.
5. The fifth hypothesis was supported. There was a significant increase in the couples' reported levels of closeness as measured by the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) scale from pre ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SE = .33$ ) to post workshop ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SE = .26$ ) phase,  $t(14) = -2.87$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r = .60$ .

## Discussion



This research has shown that attending a four-session workshop, based on systemic constructivist couple therapy (SCCT) (Reid et al., 2006), can improve many aspects of the quality of a couple's relationship as measured through different self-report instruments. A major finding from the results of this study that should be highlighted is that the workshop seems to have been beneficial to a sample of distressed couples. The recruitment process for this workshop, however, did not discriminate between the kinds of couples that were eligible to attend. Specifically the workshop was advertised in the community and any couple that was interested and able to attend all four sessions was included. Interestingly, a post-hoc analysis of the data from our obtained sample showed that their mean scores on the relationship quality measure (RRAS) were similar to the mean scores of a distressed sample from a previous study by Dalton (2005)<sup>4</sup>. In the study by Dalton (2005), the results showed that SCCT was effective in improving the relationship quality of a sample of distressed couples and moved the couples from a distressed to a normal range. Interestingly, in our study the post workshop scores of our sample on the RRAS were also similar to the post treatment scores of the improved couples in the Dalton (2005) study<sup>5</sup>. This indicates our sample likely also moved from a distressed to a more normal range of relationship satisfaction.

The importance of this finding is that, as mentioned previously, the rate of divorce is high and there is much need in the community for assistance with improving the relationship quality of the couples. Unfortunately, however, most offered programs are not empirically based which fueled our desire to conduct an empirically informed workshop in the community and evaluate

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<sup>4</sup> The pre intervention mean of our sample on the RRAS was 32.44 and it was 30.79 for the participants in the Dalton (2005) study. A t-test comparison showed that the samples were not significantly different from each other ( $t = -.67, p > .05$ ).

<sup>5</sup> The post intervention mean of our sample on the RRAS was 38.53 and it was 39.61 for the sample in the Dalton (2005) study. As well, a t-test comparison of the two samples showed that they were not significantly different from each other ( $t = .41, p > .05$ ).

its findings. Our obtained results provided support for the effectiveness of this workshop. The finding of a significant pre-post improvement with an unexpectedly distressed sample of couples provides evidence to support the supposition that a workshop such as this one may be effective for distressed couples. This is important to note since it is more difficult to bring about change when the couples are currently distressed rather than happy and looking to maintain the happiness. In addition, in light of these findings, there is much hope that this workshop can be offered as an alternative to couples therapy when appropriate. For example, the negative connotation associated with therapy for some individuals, can sometimes deter them from seeking assistance. These individuals may be more likely to attend a workshop in which other couples are also present and the couples learn to help and improve their own relationship. As well, the cost of one on one of therapy can be beyond what many couples can afford. Financial worries are less of a challenge with work that is conducted in a workshop format since small groups of couples can attend at the same time and the services can be offered at a reduced fee. Finally, in a workshop setting one professional can help many couples at the same time. This is advantageous as there is such a high need for assistance but relatively few professionals to provide specialized services for couples.

### **The Qualitative Meaning of Pre-Post Change on Measures Used in Study**

The results of this study provided support for the effectiveness of this workshop based on the used measures. The following sections examine what the changes on the measures used in this study likely indicate.

**The Revised Relationship Assessment Scale (RRAS); (Appendix A).** The RRAS is a measure of relationship quality. The obtained results from this study demonstrated a statistically significant increase on this measure after the completion of the workshop. This increase was

large enough to move the couples from a distressed to a normal range of relationship functioning. As mentioned previously, this conclusion is drawn from the comparison of the sample's mean on the RRAS to those of a distressed group of couples on the RRAS in the Dalton (2005) study who improved after receiving 7 sessions of SCCT. Dalton (2005) had also used the well-known Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) which has independently defined cut off scores for differentiating between those couples whose scores were within the 'distressed' range of the DAS from those in the 'non-distressed' range of the DAS (Spanier, 2001). Dalton (2005) found that RRAS scores were highly correlated with the DAS ( $r = .78$ ). She therefore could see that the shift on the RRAS scores were of a similar magnitude. Hence, based on our results the workshop format of SCCT seems to be as effective as the one-on-one therapy format. This is a significant finding as the workshop format allows more couples to obtain assistance and improve their relationship without the financial demands of a more intense individualized treatment. As well, not only does the workshop format allow the couples to learn and connect with other couples who may become a source of support for them long after the workshop has ended, it also helps any one couple to vicariously learn from seeing what the other couples share they are learning. The enthusiasm of a group is motivating and replaces the self-criticism and cynicism individual couples may have initially held with a positive attitude towards working together like the other couples to enhance their relationship in a healthy way.

**Relationship Measure (RM); (Appendix B).** RM is a measure designed specifically for this study in order to capture the anticipated change in the couple's relationship in areas that the workshop aimed to assist in. These areas were many, including communications, needs,

understanding, sameness, hope and unity. While RM is highly correlated with the RRAS<sup>6</sup>, it has a more specific focus on the relational dynamics of the partners and their feelings in the relationship. Some items from this measure include “I have high hopes for our relationship” and “I am able to communicate to my partner about what is important to me.” The RRAS, on the other hand, focuses more on relationship outcomes with items such as “I am very happy about the way we make decisions and resolve conflict” and “I am unhappy about the way we make financial decisions.” Hence, the RM and RRAS complement each other by demonstrating the correlation between specific relational dynamics with reported relational outcomes. The information from both of these measures combines to provide a comprehensive view of the couple’s relationship and its quality. Thus, what changes in this measure means qualitatively is the respondents are feeling more positive in these areas of their relationship combined such as more positive hopes, making decisions together, being more able to resolve conflicts combined. Similar to the findings from the RRAS, the results of this study showed a significant increase on the RM at the end of the workshop.

**The Listening Styles in Committed Relationships Scale (LSCR-Perceptions of Partner; Doell, 2003); (Appendix C).** The LSCR is a measure that assesses the degree of listening to understand versus listening to respond. While listening to respond is a more superficial way of listening, listening to understand increases one’s ability to get in touch with the speaker’s experience and comprehend the meaning behind his/her words. Similar to the SCCT protocol that dedicates time to teaching the couples about these modes of listening, the first session of the workshop in this study focused on listening styles. Furthermore, in each session thereafter the couples were encouraged to listen to understand each other during the

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<sup>6</sup> During the pre workshop phase the correlation between the measures was  $r = .72$ . The correlation was  $r = .83$  after the completion of the workshop.

practices. Many participants found that this way of communicating and understanding their partner was highly beneficial for them. For example, when asked about the most important benefit from the workshop one participant's response was "... learning to really listen ... and really understand where my partner is coming from ... learning that my perception of things can be very different than his." Additionally, another participant's response was "... learning to listen to what the other person is saying instead of giving your own feelings/reactions towards a particular topic."

The participants in this workshop showed a significant improvement on the LSCR at the end of the workshop. This is important, as the result of this study demonstrated that LSCR was significantly correlated with measures of relationship quality (RRAS and RM) both during the pre and post completion of the workshop<sup>7</sup>. One explanation for the observed correlation between listening and relationship quality could be that the more the participants were able to listen to understand their partner, the more information was incorporated into their perspective of their relationship. This enhanced perspective may have allowed some partners to better accommodate to the needs of their partners without a need to blame or criticize them. As well, a broadened perspective allowed some partners to come up with unique ways of working through their difficulties that they were not aware of before. Finally, the mere ability to speak freely in the presence of one's partner, without the need to justify and defend oneself, deepens the bond between the partners and creates intimacy in the relationship.

**The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988); (Appendix D).** The PANAS measures the respondent's feelings towards the relationship.

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<sup>7</sup> The correlation of LSCR with the RRAS was  $r = .79$  (during the pre workshop phase) and  $r = .55$  (during the post workshop phase). Moreover, the correlation of LSCR with the RM was  $r = .82$  (during the pre workshop phase) and  $r = .58$  (during the post workshop phase).

It measures positive feelings such as “Interested”, “excited”, “strong”, “enthusiastic”, “determined” as well as negative feelings including “Nervous”, “jittery”, “afraid”, “distressed” and “upset”. There was a significant improvement in the participant’s report on the PANAS after the completion of the workshop. In this study, the improvements on the Positive Affect subscale demonstrated an increasing sense of hope and optimism towards the union. As well, there was a lowering of experienced negative feelings in the relationship such as fear and anxiety. Such improvements on the PANAS make sense as each session of the workshop assisted the couples in enhancing their awareness of their relationship and understanding how they can work together in the interest of their relationship. The increased positivity and excitement towards the relationship was captured in the participant comments such as “I feel optimistic that what I have learned in the workshop will help me build a stronger relationship moving forward” and “This workshop has been an eye opener for me. I have learned a lot about my relationship and . . . the things that I can do or change to have a more enhanced relationship.”

**The Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS Scale; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992); (Appendix E).** The IOS measures the respondent’s feelings of closeness with his/her partner. In this one item measure, the respondent is asked to pick from a series of progressively more interlocked Venn diagrams the illustration that best represents his/her relationship. One of the two circles in the Venn diagram represents the self and the second circle represents the other partner. The results of this study showed that there was a significant increase in the report of the respondents on the feelings of closeness with their partners at the end of the workshop, with participants choosing more interlocked circles at the end.

This improvement makes sense as the focus of each session of the workshop was on increasing the partners’ awareness of themselves, their partners and their reciprocal interaction in

the relationship. As mentioned previously these elements combine to increase the partners' level of a shared perspective and *we-ness*. While the partners' level of *we-ness* is best measured behaviorally through their in the moment dialogue with each other, the IOS can be used as a quick self report measure of the partners' sense of unity with each other.

### **Comparison with other Approaches**

The aim in our current research was to offer the community a workshop that was evidence-informed and to evaluate its effectiveness. A major difference between the workshop in this research and the previously mentioned CRE programs is that we opened it up to the community at large and accepted any couple who expressed an interest in attending and improving their relationship. Although we did not directly categorize couples into distressed versus non-distressed categories, it is our clinical judgment based on their scores on our standardized measures and what we saw, that the majority of our obtained sample consisted of currently distressed couples. Also, as mentioned previously, post hoc comparison of our obtained sample's mean on the RRAS with those of the distressed sample in the Dalton (2005) study showed that the two samples were not significantly different from each other. The couples in our study were choosing to attend the workshop, rather than couple therapy, due to a variety of reasons such as their feelings that it would be less invasive, short-term and not financially burdensome. In contrast, as previously mentioned, CRE programs aim to work with couples who are currently satisfied with their relationship and are looking to maintain their bond. Additionally, another distinction between our model of workshop and CRE programs is that the content of our sessions was informed and based on principles and techniques from an established couple therapy. Specifically, our workshop was rooted in systemic constructivist couple therapy (SCCT) which has previously been shown to be effective in improving the quality of couples'

relationships (Reid, Dalton, Laderoute, Doell, & Nguyen, 2006). In contrast, as previously mentioned, CRE programs are based on research that identifies known risk factors to relationship quality such as poor communication and focuses on teaching couples skills that reduce their risks. On the other hand, some common factors across our workshop and a number of CRE programs included the structuring of the program in a group format, a limited number of sessions on a weekly basis, and the use of assessment through self-report measures.

Moreover, there are differences between our workshop and the PAIRS program for couples. As mentioned earlier advocates of the PAIRS program make a lot of claims regarding its empirical basis. When referring to their website, however, much of the research is not published. The few articles that are published in journals are by the same author and the latest publication was 15 years ago. In contrast to this, the SCCT workshop discussed in this research is the latest step in an evolving research program. As mentioned previously, SCCT was developed from real-life work with couples and later studies have provided evidence for its effectiveness in increasing the relationship satisfaction of couples both after the end of therapy and at a 2-year follow up (Reid et al., 2006). The aim of this workshop was to apply the obtained empirical knowledge from previous SCCT research in the community setting, and test its effectiveness when offered to a group of couples at the same time.

Another key difference that should be highlighted is the length of each program. PAIRS, is a 4-5 month long program consisting of approximately 120 hours. In contrast, the SCCT-based workshop is 4 weeks long and takes 12 hours to complete. Based on previous experience working with couples, the researchers of this study believe that a shorter program is a more practical and useful approach with couples. This is because often couples who seek assistance have to juggle work, family and children responsibilities that leave them with little time to spare.



A program that takes a few months to complete may seem like a big commitment to make for these couples. Additionally, longer programs may seem too overwhelming and intrusive for couples who may be thinking of seeking assistance but are somewhat ambivalent about it. Furthermore, even couples who do start such long programs may be unable to complete it due to unpredictable life events that may come up in an extended period. Finally, the likely increased financial costs associated with longer programs may be difficult to handle for some couples and prevent them from making use of such services.

### **Attributes of the Workshop**

Humans are complicated beings and any approach to helping and alleviating their problems should be able to accommodate to the complexity and uniqueness of individuals and their interactions with each other. Otherwise, there would be risk of coming up with simplistic solutions that, although well intentioned and possibly effective in the short term, will likely fail to work in the long run. The comprehensive nature of the systemic constructivist approach sheds light on the intricacies of humans' intrapersonal and interpersonal worlds and presents a chance to better understand human difficulties. Specifically, according to the systemic constructivist view each individual's self-system emerges due to the reciprocal interaction of many smaller systems such as the biological, psychological and neurological systems. Moreover, when individuals marry, the reciprocal interaction of their self-systems gives rise to a larger dyadic system called marriage. The marriage is then further situated within larger systems, such as the cultural or religious systems, and is in a state of constant interaction with them. Adding to such differences and complexities of individuals and their relationships, is the fact that the world is becoming increasingly more diverse. For example, in countries with high immigration rates such as Canada and the US, people of highly diverse backgrounds live, work and start families

together. Hence, it becomes even more critical for individuals to become aware of the intrapersonal and interpersonal webs of systems they are immersed in and operate from. Awareness and understanding of such connected systems helps partners in a relationship to have a better grasp of the difficulties and stressors that will inevitably come up in their relationship. Moreover, it will inform them on how to better respond to these challenges as a unit working together rather than as separate individuals each concerned with his/her own personal needs, desires and difficulties.

One of the major contributions of this workshop was that it was able to help partners step out of their usual patterns of interacting with each other and presented them with an opportunity for new ways of interacting by adding more information to their systems. For example, often times, partners in distressed relationships have unproductive dialogues with each other. They may discuss a topic of importance with each other but, more often than not, end up talking *at* each other rather than *with* each other. Both partners may be adamant about presenting their own views on the topic and either miss or fail to integrate what the other partner is trying to articulate from his/her side and perspective. This leads to a highly dissatisfying interaction for both partners and the difficulty remains intact. Moreover, the attempts to discuss the topic usually end in the same unsatisfying manner as the partners repeatedly try to present their own views every time the subject is raised. This workshop is highly beneficial for the way the couples communicate about and give meaning to the interpersonal difficulties that come up between them. For instance, through the practice of listening to understand each other, the couples are shown a window to each other's internal world, experiences and subjective reality. The benefit of accessing each other's world and fully understanding the assumptions and meanings behind the words of the partner is that each individual becomes much more aware of the many facets of

what they are discussing. According to constructivist theories, such meaningful information once gained is hard to ignore and will inevitably shape the way each partner interprets and makes meaning of the difficulties they are dealing with.

It should be noted that operating out of a systemic-constructivist paradigm requires one to not only become more open to and able to recognize the complicated systems at play in a marriage but to also adopt a non-evaluative, curious attitude towards the learning of these dynamics. It is a very challenging task for many individuals to be able to observe a difficulty that is manifesting itself within the marriage without the usual automatic judgements and evaluations. This, however, is critical to being able to learn more from a given relationship. Additionally, this paradigm encourages individuals to ask *how come* a situation or difficulty is coming up rather than *why*. There is subtle, yet important, difference between asking why and how come. The former pushes for a reason or justification, whereas the latter encourages a recognition of forces (systems) at play and how they in concert give rise to a certain situation. This way of looking at things makes individuals more prone to contextualizing the difficulties that may come up in their marriage rather than attributing it solely to one's partner or other distinct causes. Additionally, this way of understanding interpersonal difficulties is more likely to lend itself to better suited, more creative and long-term solutions to difficulties than a more limited view.

Additionally, the obtained significant effects of this workshop can be partially attributed to the focus of each session on creating an understanding and awareness of the partners' subjective reality. For instance, the training of partners in listening to understand each other during the first session is akin to the practice of empathy by therapists in therapeutic situations. Empathy is the attempt of an individual to understand another's perspective and experience from

that individual's frame of reference. Empathy contributes to the therapeutic alliance between the therapist and the client. Moreover, empathy is considered to be an intervention in and of itself as it helps the client explore his/her experience, make the implicit assumptions explicit and make new meanings of his/her experience as a result of having access to a broadened awareness (Bohart & Greenberg, 1997). Similarly, in listening to understand their partners the participants in the workshop practice empathy in that they are withholding their own judgments and perspectives on the issues and are attempting to understand and facilitate the expression of their partners' views. Hence, by listening to understand, the listener becomes more aware of the partner's reality as experienced by him/her. Additionally, the speaker, who is experiencing an empathic partner may benefit from this non-judgmental exploration of his/her views, become more aware of the different facets of his/her perspective and learn more about him/herself. Similarly, it could be the case that just as the practice of empathy leads to the strengthening of the therapeutic bond in therapeutic contexts, it could lead to the strengthening and enhancing the relationship of the partners with each other.

Being grounded in systemic-constructivist principles, a major guiding theory of the workshop was that all social systems operate out of the information they are exposed to and the meaning they make of it. It follows that to change how a system works and makes meaning it needs to be supplied with information. In the spirit of adding information to the dyadic system of the couples, the sessions of the workshop were organized in a way that partners would pick personally important topics to discuss. The skills taught in each session, however, allowed the partners to approach the discussion of these previously likely volatile topics in a way that alternative information could be derived from them. In the first session, for example, new information was added to the dyadic system of the couple with each partner attempting to listen

to understand the other rather than respond. This allowed the speaker to likely articulate more of their perspective to the other partner than in previous discussions. Having more information to work with, the couples were now in a position to approach the topic in a fresh way. Getting out of the repetitive cycle that has likely happened around the discussion of the chosen topic may additionally serve as a reinforcer for the couples and make them more likely to practice the learned skill.

Also, it should be highlighted that the series of techniques chosen for the four sessions of the workshop worked holistically and built upon each other to give rise to the observed outcome. In other words, the obtained significant effects of the workshop were the result of more than the sum of the individual techniques implemented. Moreover, it should be noted that the goal of the workshop was to enhance the couple's relationship by increasing the interpersonal processing of the couple based on systemic constructivist principles. The specific techniques used aided us in this endeavor but alternative techniques, based on systemic constructivist notions, may have been just as effective in yielding the same results. This is line with the systemic notion of equifinality that there can be many ways to the same outcome.

Another key attribute of this workshop was that it was process rather than content oriented. The focus of each session of the workshop was on improving the quality of the relationship. In fact, the couples were free to choose any topic they would like to discuss in order to proceed through the exercises designed for each session. The exercises would work with any topic because their aim was not to solve specific problems per se but to improve how the partners systemically operate as a couple and the meanings they make from the occurrences in their relationship. Long lasting change must always be generated from within a system. As such, any advice or guidance from outside of the couple, no matter how well meaning it may be,

is unlikely to work in the long run. This is why the workshop was set up in a way to increase the couple's awareness of their own dynamics in order to generate their own solutions to the difficulties that may arise in their relationship. Our focus in this workshop was to treat problems at their source and not simply remove their symptoms. It is our strong conviction that the source of these problems is the underlying relational processes and once these improve so will the difficulties that manifest themselves.

As mentioned previously, one of the strengths of this workshop was that it brought to awareness the existing facets of the partners' experiences that they were previously either unaware of or had not processed deeply. Evidence for this overall increase in awareness and impact for the couples came from their discussions about their ongoing learning from the sessions. The systemic-constructivist based exercises of the workshop all worked to increase intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness and shed light on these processes. The increased knowledge was welcomed by the partners as many were tired and frustrated of doing the same dance (patterns of interaction) around certain important topics in their relationship but not getting anywhere. The enhanced understanding led to partners being able to gain perspective on major issues in their relationship and consider alternative approaches towards their difficulties. In many cases, the participants were surprised to realize how much they didn't know about themselves and their partners and their relationship to each other. Recognizing the value of having an increased awareness, many of the participants inquired about further personal and couple therapy at the end of the workshop. The participants were keen on continuing the work in self-discovery and relationship awareness that was initiated in the workshop. In all such cases they were given referrals to potential therapists they could work with when the workshop was finished.

Also, it should be pointed out that the work done in the workshop is only the first step of a journey that will likely take the couples' relationship to a different route after the completion of the workshop. What's key is that the partners will likely realize that the difficulties that come up in their relationship are much more complicated and rich than previously assumed. The nodes of the system of their relationship become much clearer. This greater clarity will make it difficult to simply point fingers at a particular person as the cause of an interpersonal difficulty. Specifically in the workshop, we try to look at each partner's perspective in detail and how the two realities combine to give rise to the emergent system (the relationship). Currently, a follow-up is being conducted with each couple in order to be able to better describe and learn from the changes in the couples' relationship quality after they were done with the workshop.

### **Points to Consider in Future Research**

A closer examination of this research brings to light areas it could be improved upon in future research. As an example, the use of self-report measures has the potential to bias the results of the study as these could be misinterpreted by the participants. In this study, for instance, there were times when the participants were leaving additional notes on the measures they were completing to clarify their answers or sometimes they would pick more than one answer. Alternatively, self-report measures can potentially be impacted by the participants' desire to please the researchers with ratings that are more positive than they are in the partners' reality at home. The couples in this research spent a number of weeks attending the workshop. During this time, they developed a relationship with the researchers and got to know them and their research interest. It is possible that some participants, who were appreciative and thankful for the services they were receiving, may have felt the urge to report higher ratings than they

were feeling. Hence, future research would benefit from including alternative ways of measuring relationship quality other than through self-report measures.

In addition, one of the limitations of this study was that it was a single-group design. With the absence of a proper control group, the results could potentially be attributed to other factors. For example, although unlikely, it could be argued that the simple passage of time allowed the partners to be less bothered by their difficulties and for their relationship quality to increase. Alternatively, it could be argued that perhaps the partners' relationship quality was enhanced by their mutual agreement to work on their relationship. Perhaps filling out the relationship measures in the beginning of the workshop also increased the couples' awareness of their own relationship and areas it could be improved upon. Hence, the increased resolve and motivation of the couple to enhance their bond, and not the SCCT principles upon which the workshop was based on, was the main reason for the observed effects. Although these are highly unlikely explanations for the significant effects obtained in this study, the addition of a control group to future implementation of this workshop could serve to empirically address these alternative explanations. Specifically, in future research, the workshop could include a waitlist control group in which the participants would come in for a first session, be introduced to the facilitators and the other couples in their group, and asked to complete the self-report measures regarding their relationship. The actual sessions for this group, however, would start a month later at which point they are asked to do the measures again in order to track any changes in their relationship quality since their original report. The changes can then be compared against the obtained results from the couples that started the workshop right away. If the group who receives the workshop right away shows significantly more improvement than the wait-list control group, further support would be provided for the effectiveness of the workshop. It



should be noted that the participants would be randomly assigned to any potential group. The randomization would serve to distribute any possible participant differences between the groups and increase the confidence in the obtained results.

Moreover, the current workshop was implemented with mostly two couples per workshop. It remains an empirical question what the effects of the workshop would be if the workshop was run with a larger group such as three couples at a time. In order to accommodate to a larger group, however, some modifications will likely need to be made to the format of the current workshop. For instance, in order for the facilitators to work one-on-one with each of the couples during the private practices of the couples, the sessions would need to be longer if more couples are included. Even with the longer sessions, however, it is likely that the time of the private work of the facilitators with the couples would be reduced. As such, it may be beneficial to ask a couple to volunteer to do an exercise in front of the group in each of the sessions in order for the facilitators to work with one couple while the other couples observe and learn from what they watch. The volunteer couple could be asked to pick a less personal topic for the purposes of the group demonstration, in order to ensure their comfort and privacy. Finally having more couples present in a workshop would allow for even better and more fruitful group discussions relating to the practices. As such, the time allotted for group discussions could be increased in order to benefit from the simultaneous presence of a lot more couples in the workshop.

In addition, future implementation of the workshop would likely be enhanced by added sessions. This conclusion is informed by the feedback from the couples at the end of the workshop who felt added sessions would give them more time to process what they were learning and to further talk and discuss it openly. The socially congenial ‘working on our relationship’ atmosphere of the workshop and having other participants there working on their

own relationship all combined to give the couples a safe and open atmosphere to increase their relationship awareness and satisfaction.

Since this workshop is based on systemic-constructivist approaches to understanding complex interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics many more exercises could be added that would potentially work to shed light on these processes. For example, the focus of an added fifth session to the workshop could be on having the partners help a fictional couple with their presenting difficulties. Specifically, each couple in the workshop would be given a case example of a fictional couple who are having certain relational challenges and the partners would be asked to work together with the goal of helping this couple. This exercise would be beneficial for the couples as it requires them to pull on their learning and understandings of relational dynamic from previously attended sessions and to help the fictional couple understand their challenge better. This also allows them to exercise their developing intuition and wisdom about their relationship by thinking more analytically when looking at relational difficulties such as those of the hypothetical couple, because the nature of the exercise is to help another couple. Hopefully, with practice, the objectivity and the application of mutually analytical skills when dealing with difficulties would become more instilled and automatic when they are working on their own difficulties as well. Additionally, an added benefit of this exercise is that it requires the partners to work as a team and discuss this fictional couple's challenges together in order to help them. This is key as when the couple slowly becomes adept at working together as a unit they then can potentially apply the same skills to working on difficulties that are not others but rather personal. This ability to use analytical thinking to process one's more experiential (emotional, reactive, fantasy) is part of the SCCT dual processing approach taught as part of the workshop.

A potential sixth session could focus on asking the couples to extend and expand on their learned skills from the workshop to anticipate a challenge that may come up in their relationship and talk to each other about how they would respond as a unit. The anticipated challenge could vary from couple to couple but could include various topics such as becoming new parents, relocating to a new city or responding to aging parents in need of care. This dialogue would serve to further give voice to the internal world of each partner and their assumptions, potential fears and wishes for the future. Being aware of one's own and the other's internal processes, the partners would be in a position to discuss together potential ways to respond that would be beneficial for the relationship they share with each other. Additionally, the work of this session could be likened to inoculation in so far as it prepares them to anticipate old patterns and how to respond and eventually mitigate against their occurrence. Discussing likely future challenges in advance may help increase the couple's resilience and ability to work together should they occur in the future.

Another consideration in future implementation of this workshop is to offer it on a pay basis to couples. Paying for the services they are receiving could serve to further motivate the couples to work on their relationship and make use of their learning from the workshop. It is hypothesized that the more couples invest in their work in the workshop (i.e. in terms of their time, emotions, efforts, and finances) the stronger its effects would likely be for them. Additionally, being serious and motivated about the workshop would likely result in more couples practicing the assigned tasks and homework in between the sessions. In the current study, although the couples were specifically asked to do homework between sessions many missed doing it from time to time. Moreover, paying for the workshop might also motivate the

couples to attend all sessions as planned. In the current study, three of the excluded couples from the final analysis were omitted mainly because they missed part of the workshop.

Moreover, it is important to conduct a follow-up in order to see if the enhanced relationship quality obtained during the workshop is maintained after the workshop has ended. All the interventions in this workshop were designed with the aim to help couples be the experts of their own relationship. As such, it is expected and hoped that the obtained positive results at the end of the sessions would be maintained at a follow-up.

Finally, the design of this study was focused on the outcomes from the workshop and not the process theorized to be the means for beneficial change. The workshops were designed to induce change based on SCCT principles and the primary purpose of this study was to focus on the outcomes including their magnitude. Now that this study was successful, future replications ought to include ways of assessing the underlying assumption of change and the connection with outcomes. The SCCT and its accompanying approach is based on the supposition that when each partner identifies with the marital relationship (i.e., feels, thinks and acts as part of the relationship as if it is part of who he/she is) a certain symbiosis takes place. *We-ness* is a buzzword for the underlying inclusion of the relationship in one's identity. Thus, future research would be enhanced by obtaining a measure of a couple's level of *we-ness* and its correlation with outcomes.

In conclusion, the results of this study provide evidence for the effectiveness of a SCCT-based four-session workshop in enhancing the relationship quality of couples. The findings are promising especially given the current worrisome frequency and negative impact of divorce. Further implementation of this workshop in the future will likely not only benefit more couples but add to our current knowledge of how to best implement the workshops.

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## APPENDIX A: Revised Relationship Assessment Scale (RRAS)

Please give a rating, on a scale of 1 to 5, to each statement.

- 1 = strongly disagree
- 2 = moderately disagree
- 3 = neither agree nor disagree
- 4 = moderately agree
- 5 = strongly agree

1. My partner and I understand each other perfectly. \_\_\_\_\_
2. I am very happy with how we handle role responsibilities in our relationship. \_\_\_\_\_
3. My partner understands and sympathizes with me. \_\_\_\_\_
4. I am not happy about our communication and feel that my partner does not understand me. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Our relationship is a success. \_\_\_\_\_
6. I am very happy about the way we make decisions and resolve conflicts. \_\_\_\_\_
7. I am unhappy about the way we make financial decisions. \_\_\_\_\_
8. I have some needs that are not being met by our relationship. \_\_\_\_\_
9. I am very happy with how we manage our leisure activities and the time we spend together. \_\_\_\_\_
10. I don't regret my relationship with my partner. \_\_\_\_\_
11. I am dissatisfied about our relationship with my parents, in-laws, and/or friends. \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B: Relationship Measure (RM)

Please rate yourself on a scale of 1 -9 on the following items (1= low ; 9= very high).

### Sameness

1- My partner and I have shared aims/goals. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

2- My partner and I have much in common. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

### Understanding

3- I feel my partner is able to understand me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

4- My partner sees me for who I am. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

5- I feel that I am able to understand my partner and his/her points of view and experiences.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

### Needs

6- I feel that my needs can be met in our relationship. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

### Communication

7- I am able to communicate to my partner about what is important to me.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

8- It is easy for me to talk with my partner. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

9- I can easily open up to my partner and tell him/her about what is on my mind.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

10- My partner and I have the ability to talk to each other even when we hold very different points of view. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Acceptance

11- I feel my partner can be welcoming and accepting towards me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

12- I feel that my partner can be non-judgmental towards me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Support

13 - I feel that I can turn to my partner for emotional support if I need to.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

14- I feel that I can rely on my partner. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Hope

15 - I have high hopes for our relationship. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

16- I feel that my partner and I know how to EFFECTIVELY resolve the challenges that may come up in our relationship. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Unity

17- I feel my partner and I are part of a team. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

18- My partner and I can get along and easily work together. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Companionship

19- Being together and spending time with my partner feels natural (things go smoothly).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

9

20- We look forward to doing things together. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Hope

21- I feel positive about our future together. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

22- We are both optimistic about making things work better for both of us.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

## APPENDIX C: Listening Styles in Committed Relationships Scale (LSCR –Perceptions of Partner)

Following are some statements concerning communication patterns which may be evident in interactions between partners. For each statement, please circle the number below that best indicates how often you believe that **your partner** engages in the behavior described.

| Most of<br>Always | the time | Often | Sometimes | often | Rarely | Never |
|-------------------|----------|-------|-----------|-------|--------|-------|
|-------------------|----------|-------|-----------|-------|--------|-------|

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

1. When I am communicating with my partner, he/she pays attention not only to my verbal message, but also to my expression and gestures.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

2. If my partner is unclear about what I am saying, he/she will ask for more detail.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

- 
- 
3. If my partner has asked for clarification of my message and finds that he/she is still confused, he/she will continue to ask for more detail.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

4. It seems as though my partner continues to think about what I have said to him/her even after I have finished talking.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

5. My partner communicates to me (both verbally and nonverbally) that he/she is interested in what I have to say.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

6. My partner delays responding to what I am saying until he/she has had time to think about what I said.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

7. When I am explaining myself, my partner seems to try to get a sense of what things must be like me (i.e. he/she tries to “put him/herself in my shoes”), so that he/she may better understand how I must be feeling.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

8. Even when my partner disagrees with what I am saying, he/she encourages me to continue talking so that he/she may better attempt to understand how I am feeling.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

9. When I am communicating with my partner he/she pays attention to the broader message which I am trying to convey, and does not get caught up with or react to particular details of what I am saying.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

10. On topics which my partner already has a strong opinion about, and on which I have a differing opinion, I find that my partner does not really listen to what I have to say.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

11. If my partner is preoccupied while I am communicating, and is not really listening to what I am saying, he/she will “fake” attention (e.g. he/she will simply nod or agree with whatever I am saying).

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

12. I believe that my partner gives more importance to expressing his/her own opinions than he/she does to listening to mine.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

13. My partner doesn't seem to find it necessary to pay close attention when I am talking, because he/she believes that he/she already knows what I am going to say before I even say it.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

14. When I am talking to my partner, I find that he/she is easily distracted.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

15. While I am talking to my partner, he/she appears to be thinking about how he/she would like to respond to me rather than about what I am actually saying.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

16. When my partner feels that what I am saying is “unimportant”, he/she does not give me his/her undivided attention.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

17. My partner tends to respond to what I am saying before I have finished talking.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

18. When my partner is not interested in what I am talking about, he/she will change the subject.

**1      2      3      4      5      6      7**

# APPENDIX D: Postive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)

This scale consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Read **each** item and then mark the appropriate answer in the space next to that word. Indicate to what extent you feel this way with regards to your relationship in the last 2 weeks. Use the following scale to record your answers.

|               |          |            |             |           |
|---------------|----------|------------|-------------|-----------|
| 1             | 2        | 3          | 4           | 5         |
| Very slightly | a little | moderately | quite a bit | extremely |
| Or not at all |          |            |             |           |

\_\_\_\_\_ interested

\_\_\_\_\_ irritable

\_\_\_\_\_ distressed

\_\_\_\_\_ alert

\_\_\_\_\_ excited

\_\_\_\_\_ ashamed

\_\_\_\_\_ upset

\_\_\_\_\_ inspired

\_\_\_\_\_ strong

\_\_\_\_\_ nervous

\_\_\_\_\_ guilty

\_\_\_\_\_ determined

\_\_\_\_\_ scared

\_\_\_\_\_ attentive

\_\_\_\_\_ hostile

\_\_\_\_\_ jittery

\_\_\_\_\_ enthusiastic

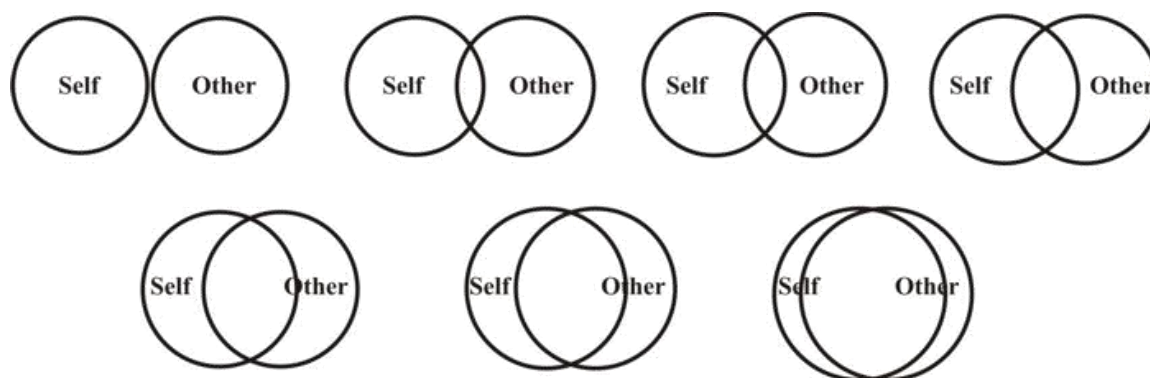
\_\_\_\_\_ active

\_\_\_\_\_ proud

\_\_\_\_\_ afraid

## APPENDIX E: Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS)

Please circle the picture below which best describes your relationship.





## APPENDIX F: Workshop Feedback

- What is your overall feeling about the workshop?
- Would you recommend this workshop to a friend? Why or why not?
- In what ways could this workshop be improved upon?
- When you look back what was the most important benefit of the workshop for your relationship?
- Was there any particular ideas that you got while attending the workshop that wasn't necessarily presented in the workshop but you found useful?